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Allan Greer

From folklore to revolution: charivaris and the Lower Canadian rebellion of 1837^{*}

We have given this Charivari
Because it is our right.

(from a Basque popular play)¹

For those interested in the connections between politics and popular culture, the charivari holds a peculiar fascination. Originally an aggressive ritual directed against marital deviants, the charivari came in France to be used for overtly political purposes. 'The charivari', Charles Tilly has observed, 'deserves special attention because it illustrates the displacement of an established form of collective action from its home territory to new ground; during the first half of the nineteenth century French people often used the charivari and related routines to state positions on national politics.'² But the French were not the only people who deployed the charivari form for political purposes in the first half of the nineteenth century; a broadly similar development occurred at about the same time in the former French colony of Canada. Indeed, the transition was much more abrupt in North America than in Europe. The French-Canadian charivari had long been notable for its traditionalism as to form, object and occasion, but suddenly in 1837, when Lower Canada (now the province of Quebec) was rocked by a revolutionary upheaval, this folkloric ritual made a dramatic appearance as an important vehicle for mobilizing the

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¹ Violet Alford, 'Rough music or charivari', *Folklore*, LXX (December 1959), 508.

² Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 30. Other works dealing with the political use of the charivari

form under the July monarchy include: Félix Ponteil, 'Le ministre des finances Georges Humann et les émeutes anti-fiscales en 1841', *Revue Historique*, LXXIX (1947), 332; Rolande Bonnain-Moerdyk and Donald Moerdyk, 'A propos du charivari, discours bourgeois et coutume populaire', *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations* (hereafter *AESC*), 29e année (May-June 1974), 693-704; Yves-Marie Bercé, *Fête et révolte: des mentalités populaires du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1976), 43-4; Maurice Agulhon, *La République au village: les populations du Var de la Révolution à la IIe République* (Paris, 1979), 266.

population against the colonial government. Enlisted not simply to 'state positions' or register 'protests', the charivari form was actually used to destroy elements of the existing state structure and even to prefigure a new regime. This was displacement with a vengeance!

On the surface, there was little in the Canadian charivari custom in the years before the Rebellion of 1837 that foreshadowed its future political role. To British visitors of the early nineteenth century, it seemed a picturesque but essentially harmless practice, something that could be written up in travel books to enliven the standard account of vast forests and magnificent waterfalls. The following description was based on a charivari that occurred at Quebec City in 1817:

Here is a curious custom, which is common through the provinces, of paying a visit to any old gentleman, who marries a young wife. The young men assemble at some friends house, and disguise themselves as satyrs, negroes, sailors, old men, Catholic priests, etc., etc. Having provided a coffin, and large paper lanthorns, in the evening they sally out. The coffin is placed on the shoulder of four of the men, and the lanthorns are lighted and placed at the top of poles; followed by a motley group, they proceed towards the dwelling of the new married couple, *performing* discordantly on drums, fifes, horns, and tin pots, amidst the shouts of the populace. When they arrive at the house of the offender against, and hardy invader of, the laws of love and nature, the coffin is placed down, and a mock service is begun to be said over the supposed body. In this stage of the affair, if Benedict invites them into his house and entertains them, he hears no more of it. If he keeps his doors shut, they return night after night, every time with a fresh ludicrous composition, as *his courtship*, or *will*, which is read over with emphasis, by one of the frolicking party, who frequently pauses, whilst they salute the ears of the persecuted mortal with their music and shouting. This course is generally repeated till they tire him out, and he commutes with them by giving, perhaps, five pounds towards the frolic, and five pounds for the poor.³

Though this all seemed 'curious' to an Englishman, a charivari along these lines would not have looked strange to a tourist from France. The mocking, carnivalesque tone of the proceedings, the nocturnal setting, the loud and raucous noise, the masks and costumes of the participants and the elaborate, insistently public, street procession all recall French practices dating back to the Middle Ages.⁴ Similarly the occasion of charivaris, following a

³ John Palmer, *Journal of Travels in the United States of North America and in Lower Canada performed in the year 1817* (1818), 227-8. On this particular charivari, see also, 'Un charivari à Québec', *Bulletin des Recherches historiques* (Lévis), XLIV (Aug. 1938), 242-3; *Le Canadien* (Quebec), 10 Oct. 1817. Travel accounts describing other charivaris are cited in Bryan D. Palmer, 'Discordant Music: charivaris and white-capping in nineteenth-century North America', *Labour-le travail*, III (1978), 5-62.

⁴ Among the works dealing with the charivaris of early modern France, see Arnold Van

Gennep, *Manuel de folklore français contemporain*, 4 vols (Paris, 1937-49), II, 614-28; Roger Vaultier, *Le folklore pendant la guerre de Cent Ans d'après les lettres de rémission du trésor des chartes* (Paris, 1965); Natalie Z. Davis, 'The reasons of misrule' in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), 97-123; Claude Gauvard and Altan Gokalp, 'Les conduites de bruit et leur signification à la fin du Moyen Age: le charivari', *AFSC*, 29e année (May-June 1974), 693-704; Jacques LeGoff and Jean-Claude Schmitt (eds), *Le Charivari* (Paris, 1981).

wedding, particularly that of an ill-assorted couple, matches the customs of Canada's original mother-country. There were differences, however. French customs, in this as in other matters, varied greatly from region to region. Moreover, practices seem to have evolved over the years so that, even before the emergence of the fully political charivari in the nineteenth century, charivari-type harassment, sometimes associated with other customs, was often directed against all kinds of unpopular figures such as corrupt officials, submissive husbands or promiscuous women. The colonial ritual, by contrast, seems quite uniform and consistent, from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth and from one end of Lower Canada to the other. More faithful than their European cousins to early modern models, the French of Canada always directed charivaris at newly married couples only. This seems to be one of those areas in which a European overseas settlement functioned as a sort of 'cultural museum' in which customs were distilled, purified and preserved, even as they changed drastically or disappeared in the old country.⁵ Such resolute orthodoxy prior to the Rebellion makes the politicization of the charivari in 1837 all the more surprising. What was there about this 'curious custom' – annoying but hardly subversive in appearance – that lent itself to a situation of acute political strife?

Although the charivari was a custom characteristic of a pre-industrial society, it would be a mistake, in my view, to regard it as simply a throwback, an expression of a 'primal ethic', hostile to market relations and punitive in its reaction to nonconformist behaviour.⁶ In its Canadian guise, at least, the ritual was not part of any larger pattern of collective regulation of marriage and domestic life through public demonstrations. There was no French-Canadian equivalent of the *azouade* ('donkey-ride') or 'skimmington', humiliating punishments inflicted in early modern France and England on submissive husbands, scolding wives and other deviants.⁷ Neither did drunks and women accused of pre-marital sex have reason to fear a charivari, as was the case in some areas of Germany and the US South. Here it was the marital match itself that was at issue, not the content of domestic life. Prior to 1837, Canadian charivaris always followed a wedding and, in every case I have examined, the marriage was a 'mismatch': either the groom was much older than the bride or vice versa, or else one of the partners had been previously married. Several accounts also mention a social mismatch accompanying the disparity in age or marital status. There was, for example, Monsieur Bellet, the target of the Quebec City charivari described above. A prominent merchant of the town, this sixty-seven-year-old widower had married his

⁵ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie is convinced that French folktales recorded in contemporary Quebec display archaic characteristics not present in European versions since the eighteenth century. See *Love, Death and Money in the Pays d'Oc*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth, 1984), 271–2, 437–9.

⁶ This phrase comes from Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), 435–61. More subtle versions of the same view can be found in Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern*

Family (New York, 1975), 46–7 and Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), 200.

⁷ In addition to the works cited in the previous note, see E. P. Thompson, '“Rough Music”: le charivari anglais', *AESC* 27e année (March–April 1972), 285–312; Martin Ingram, 'Ridings, rough music and the “Reform of Popular Culture” in early modern England', *Past and Present*, cv (Nov. 1984), 79–113; Christian Desplat, *Charivaris en Gascogne: la 'morale des peuples' du XVIe au XXe siècle* (Paris, 1982).

young servant girl. Just as typical was the charivari directed against a 'widow lady of considerable fortune' who wed 'a young gentleman of the Commissariat Department'.⁸

Widowers marrying again were never the exclusive, or even the primary target of Canadian charivaris. Indeed, weddings joining widows and bachelors were far more likely to trigger a demonstration than the remarriage of men. Moreover, people of all ages and both sexes took part in the festivities, though men appropriated the starring roles. A bishop's ordinance condemning a Quebec charivari in 1683 makes explicit reference to the participation of 'a large number of persons of both sexes'.⁹ In Renaissance France, by way of contrast, charivaris were commonly the work of village youth societies and they were directed specifically against mature widowers or outsiders who deprived local young men of a potential mate. This has led some anthropologically minded scholars to analyse the ritual and the payment exacted from the victim in terms of a specifically male intervention in the 'marriage market',¹⁰ but, in French Canada, charivari does not seem to have arisen from any protectionist impulses of bachelordom.

Why then, if not to regulate the local supply of brides, were ill-assorted marriages singled out for persecution? Writing of Old Régime France, André Burgière suggests that charivari directed at widows and widowers stemmed from ancient Catholic misgivings about remarriage. The traditionalist crowd thus took it upon itself to enforce restrictions long abandoned by the clergy. As a result, the church emerged as the earliest and most consistent opponent of charivari, for the ritual represented a clear assault on its current marital regulations.¹¹ In seeking links between the mentality underlying charivari and the outlook of the official church, Burgière opens a promising line of enquiry. Yet it seems to me that the connections may have been much closer than he realizes – at least they were in French Canada. Priests and bishops had reservations, not only about remarriages, but also about the other mismatches that provoked charivaris. Moreover, these were not ancient objections discarded by the clergy centuries before they were taken up by the mob; they were concerns that found expression even in the nineteenth century. The marital ideology of the charivari, I would argue, was not an anachronism and it was not essentially in contradiction with clerical views.

As far as the church was concerned, the wedding ceremony was a sacrament and therefore it could only be approached in a special spiritual state. The *Rituel* of the diocese of Quebec, a sort of priests' manual published in 1703 but still widely used more than a century later, insisted that prospective brides and grooms must 'have a genuinely pure intent, looking to marriage only for the glory of God and their own sanctification, and not for the satisfaction of their cupidity, their ambition, their greed and their shameful passions'. The fiancés, of course, had to take confession before the nuptials and curés were expected to impress upon them the true nature of marriage:

⁸ Edward Allen Talbot, *Five Years' Residence in the Canadas: including a Tour through part of the United States of America, in the year 1823* (1824), 300.

⁹ *Rituel du diocèse de Québec, publié par l'ordre de Monseigneur l'évêque de Québec* (Paris, 1703), 363.

¹⁰ Of course, by the eighteenth century, the

French charivari was no longer (if it ever was) a specialized weapon to be used only against widowers who 'stole' potential wives from the young men of a locality.

¹¹ André Burgière, 'Pratique du charivari et répression religieuse dans la France d'ancien régime' in LeGoff and Schmitt, *op. cit.*, 190–1.

Curés will inform the faithful that the purpose of this sacrament is to give to married persons the grace which they require to help and comfort one another, to live together in sanctity, and to contribute to the edification of the Church, not only by bringing forth legitimate children, but also by taking care to provide for their spiritual regeneration and a truly Christian education. *They will above all point out to those who wish to marry that persons who wed out of sensuality, seeking in marriage only sensual pleasure, or out of avarice, endeavouring only to establish a temporal fortune, commit a great sin, because they profane this sacrament*, and, in using something holy to satisfy their passions, they offend against the grace that Our Lord has attached to it.¹²

To marry for money or out of mere sexual appetite was not just morally reprehensible then, it was a serious sin for it defiled the holy sacrament of marriage.

This was all very well at the theoretical level, but how was a priest to detect such impure motives and prevent them from profaning the wedding rite? Unless candidates for matrimony made a direct confession of greed or lust, he could never be sure about their spiritual state. To refuse to marry anyone about whom he harboured suspicions would be to court disasters of all sorts (lay hostility, unsanctioned cohabitation, recourse to Protestant ministers . . .); furthermore, secular law would not allow refusal without good cause. In practice, then, the effort to ensure the purity of marriage consisted mainly of general exhortations to this effect and personal discussions, in the confessional and elsewhere, with candidates for wedlock. Naturally, a curé would give particular attention to couples whose external circumstances seemed suspicious. When a young woman married an old widower it might just be that she was after his money and that he, for his part, had more than a moderate share of lust in his heart. Thus we find a conscientious Canadian priest writing to his bishop for advice in the case of a rich widow of his parish who wished to marry a bachelor half her age. Legally, 'you may not refuse to celebrate an ill-assorted marriage,' answered the bishop, but, 'in your capacity as confessor, you should refuse absolution to anyone who wishes to marry only in order to get rich.'¹³ Disparities of age and wealth were not objectionable in themselves, but they did alert vigilant clergymen to the possibility of sinful motives. By the same token, the determination of a widow or widower to remarry, while perfectly acceptable in itself, could also raise questions. Here was someone who had already established a family and who perhaps had children. Were they marrying again for the right reasons or were they simply looking for a new sex partner? Just to be on the safe side, the priestly manual cited above therefore specified a supplement to the wedding ceremony for second marriages that consisted mainly of Psalms 127 and 128, with their heavy emphasis on wives like fruitful vines and husbands with quivers full of children.

¹² *Rituel du diocèse de Québec*, 347, 329 (my translation and my emphasis). Cf. Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexuality*, trans. Richard Southern (Cambridge, 1979), 161-4.

¹³ Serge Gagnon, 'Amours interdites et mis-ères conjugales dans le Québec rural de la fin du

XVIII^e siècle jusque vers 1830 (l'arbitrage des prêtres)' in François Lebrun and Normand Séguin (eds), *Sociétés villageoises et rapports villes-campagnes au Québec et dans la France de l'ouest, XVII^e - XX^e siècles* (Trois-Rivières, 1987), 323 (my translation). This case occurred in 1810.

A priest had to marry an 'ill-assorted' couple even if he harboured doubts about the purity of their intentions, but the crowd in the street might react differently to the outward signals of impurity, giving loud and dramatic voice to widely held suspicions. The charivari might then be seen as a symbolic accusation of defiling a sacred rite. This surely is why a wink-and-nudge sexual jocularly, not to say downright obscenity, formed a central theme of most charivaris. Admittedly, sexual allusions were a feature of other carnival-type festivities but it seems to me that, beyond the general cheekiness, there was a specific and personal charge of illicit lust implied in the charivari. It is important to emphasize, however, that it was not 'immorality' as such that was being chastised. Recall that, in French Canada, charivaris were not directed against adulterers, spouse beaters and the like. Nor, as far as I can tell, were couples of roughly the same age ever persecuted by crowds who cited other grounds for believing they were marrying out of sensuality or avarice. The immediate purpose of charivari was not to correct immorality or even to guard the sanctity of marriage against 'real' impurity. It amounted, rather, to a ritualistic response to the *signs* of desecration, a public rebuke filled with accusations of lasciviousness, that aired suspicions shared by clergy and laity alike.

But more was involved than a simple clearing of the air; charivari was also, as many commentators have pointed out, a punitive procedure. Victims were punished through both humiliation and monetary exaction, two penal techniques favoured by the church and the criminal courts of the period. Public shaming was, of course, a central feature of any charivari, inseparable from the noisy charge of desecration. It recalled the *amende honorable*, a practice common under the French regime when criminals had to go through the town wearing only a shirt and stopping occasionally to beg God's forgiveness.¹⁴ The ecclesiastical version of the *amende honorable*, much milder than that prescribed by the judiciary, involved a public confession of sin, for example by couples who had engaged in premarital sex.¹⁵ Like these practices of church and state, charivari penalized people by making a public spectacle of their faults. The *amende honorable* was more than simply a penal technique, however. In the forms deployed by both priests and judges the wayward subject had to become a penitent, confessing his sin and participating in his own correction. The charivari, too, as I shall argue below, involved an important penitential element. But, before leaving the subject of the punitive aspects of charivari, let us look at the monetary penalties that, along with public shaming, were designed to make the ceremony an unpleasant experience for its victims.

Considerable emphasis was placed, by Lower Canadian crowds at least, on the payment of what amounted to a charivari fine. The sums involved were often quite substantial – fifty pounds, to take one example from Montreal¹⁶ – though the exact amount varied from case to case, depending, it seems, on the subject's ability to pay. The level of the fine was indeed the subject of elaborate and prolonged negotiation. Usually some respected local figure was employed as a mediator during the daytime intervals between the raucous visitations and he would try to establish the terms of peace and then, later, he might see that the funds were disposed of according to the agreed-upon arrangement. Meanwhile, as negotiations proceeded by day, at night the air still rang with increasingly annoying demonstrations

¹⁴ André Lachance, *La justice criminelle du roi au Canada au XVIIIe siècle: tribunaux et officiers* (Quebec, 1978), 113–15.

¹⁵ Gagnon, *op. cit.*, 324.

¹⁶ Talbott, *op. cit.*, 303.

calculated to break down the resistance and loosen the purse-strings of the unfortunate victims. The proceeds of a charivari were normally divided fifty-fifty, with half the fine going to the participants to pay for their 'expenses' (i.e. celebratory drinks in the tavern) while the other half was contributed to an organized charity or distributed directly to the local poor.

This use of fines was another way in which a charivari insisted on its own legitimacy by aping the methods of constituted authority. Under the British regime as well as the French, magistrates generally kept a specified share of any fines and ordered the balance to be turned over to a parish vestry, a hospital, or to government coffers. The church also collected monetary penalties, notably from couples seeking permission to marry in spite of the impediment of consanguinity. A bishop usually issued a dispensation only on payment of a substantial fee, set, it appears, according to the petitioner's financial resources as reported by the parish priest. By the early nineteenth century – a time when charivaris were particularly frequent – money from this source had come to constitute a major element in the revenues of the diocese of Quebec. Even though the funds were applied to good Catholic charities, the practice aroused serious concern in the Vatican.¹⁷ Like the clergy, the charivari crowds were probably actuated to some degree by purely economic considerations: all indications are that merchants and other relatively wealthy individuals were singled out for persecution.

Besides functioning as a penalty and as a means of soaking the rich, the charivari fine played a third and equally important role. It acted as a token of agreement signifying the re-establishment of peace between the targets and the perpetrators of ritual attack. In offering money, the newly married couple signified, however reluctantly, their submission to the judgement of their neighbours. Moreover, this forced gift implied a recognition – purely at the level of outward acts, of course – of the legitimacy of the charivari itself. The subjects were needled, nagged, annoyed and threatened until they made a gesture signifying acceptance of the charivari, until they themselves became participants in the proceedings. When victims treated the ceremony with disdain, when they refused to sue for peace or, worse still, when they called on the 'forces of order' to stop the demonstration, the invariable result was that the charivari intensified. From the crowd's point of view, the offence was then compounded for, in addition to soiling the wedding rites, the subjects had also challenged its own authority to right the wrong. This is why charivaris could go on and on – sometimes for three weeks or a month – and with escalating intensity; when couples were stubborn in their refusal to pay, the custom itself became the issue and the struggle therefore raged all the more fiercely.

As soon as a fine had changed hands, however, the harassment stopped. The money served then as a token for the crowd as well as for the victim and it placed the former under an obligation to drop hostilities. A village notary at Terrebonne watched (and probably participated in) a charivari against a sixty-eight-year-old widow who married a bachelor, a cooper by trade, aged fifty. As recorded in the notary's diary, the demonstration went on for five days, escalating on each successive night:

such that, in order to have peace, our young couple were forced to employ a mediator to discuss terms with these gentlemen. After intense negotiations an agreement was

¹⁷ Gagnon, *op. cit.*, 317.

finally concluded this morning and it was settled that for three pounds, of which one pound to pay the expenses of the charivari and the rest to be distributed to the local poor, the newlyweds may in future indulge peacefully in all the pleasures of their union.¹⁸

There may have been some hard feelings in the wake of a charivari, but there is no indication that, under normal circumstances, they would have been lasting. We hear, on the contrary, of a young man of Montreal who married a widow in 1833; exactly a year after his charivari he was elected for the first time as local representative to the colonial assembly.¹⁹ Certainly there is no reason to think that Canadian charivari victims were 'permanently marked' as were, according to E. P. Thompson, the targets of the less restrained sort of 'rough music' dished up in the English-speaking world.²⁰ But then, accusation and punishment were only part of the ritual of charivari; these were but preliminaries to the treaty of peace and reconciliation, marked by the presentation of expiatory coin.

We have moved, in discussing the charivari fine, from the area of punishment to the realm of reconciliation. Except where the crowd was defeated or thwarted in its aims, the thrust of its actions seems to have been to bring about, willy-nilly, the reintegration into the community of wayward members suspected of desecration. Nowhere in the French-Canadian record prior to 1837 does one find relentless persecution, or any apparent desire to expel or eliminate a 'cancerous element' by means of charivari. This was hardly a lay version of excommunication, then; the more apt analogy would be to less absolute ecclesiastical sanctions, corrective measures such as the fine or the *amende honorable* that required sinners to make their submission to a higher authority in order to gain readmittance to the fold.

Aiming as it did to reintegrate 'deviants' rather than to expel them, the charivari was not the expression of pure hostility; on the other hand, it was hardly a friendly and anodyne operation. It took resistance for granted and was designed to overcome that resistance. And when opposition, from the charivari subject or from a third party, was serious, ugly scenes could ensue. The night watch of Montreal tried to break up a charivari in 1821 and even managed to arrest a few isolated revellers, but the crowd soon counter-attacked, beating up the constables on the scene and beseiging their headquarters until the prisoners were released.²¹ A man was killed in the same city two years later when the charivari victim fired on the crowd assembled outside his windows; the mob tore down his house in retaliation.²² Episodes of this sort provided grist to the mill of middle-class reformers

¹⁸ Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), MG24, I109, diary of F.-H. Séguin, 83. My translation does not do justice to the *double entendre* of the final phrase of the original, which suggests both full rights of possession in the legal jargon familiar to our notary-diarist and sexual fulfilment: '*les nouveaux mariés pourront à l'avenir se livrer paisiblement à toutes les jouissances de leur union.*'

¹⁹ Robert-Lionel Séguin, *Les divertissements en Nouvelle-France* (Ottawa, 1968), 73.

²⁰ Thompson, *op. cit.*, 290.

²¹ Talbott, *op. cit.*, 302-3.

²² Palmer, *op. cit.*, 28-9; Archives nationales du Québec, dépôt de Montréal, P1000/49-1102, émeute de juin 1823 à Montréal; Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, Montréal, journal of Romuald Trudeau, 1 June 1823.

anxious to suppress the 'barbarous custom' of charivari.²³ Yet to regard such violent conflict as simply an instance of the clash of popular turbulence and bourgeois order is to miss some crucial characteristics of the charivari as practised in Lower Canada.²⁴ Far from being spontaneous or anarchic, these were fairly organized demonstrations, carefully prepared in advance. More to the point, charivaris, though filled with bluffs and threats to their targets, were quite restrained. Real violence occurred only when the crowd came under actual attack. From the outside, the Montreal riots of 1821 and 1823 look like folkloric customs that got 'out of hand', but really all that separated them from a 'normal' charivari was the active challenge mounted, in one case by the police, in the other by the bridegroom. The crowd's insistence on its own authority and on its right – indeed its duty – to carry out its mandate was a common feature of all charivaris.

The pre-1837 charivari was not in any clear sense oppositional. Whereas themes of social and political criticism were very much a part of charivari and carnivalesque entertainments in Renaissance Europe,²⁵ in French-Canada, despite the presence of anti-clerical overtones and such 'ritual inversion' symbolism as cross-dressing, subversive messages were quite muted. Indeed, one might well consider the charivari a 'conservative' ceremony (in so far as the vocabulary of political doctrine has any meaning in this context). Not only did it ape the procedures of priests and magistrates, it functioned as a complementary form of social control, helping to chasten deviants of a very particular sort in strictly limited circumstances. Its ultimate point of reference, moreover, was the orthodox teachings of Catholicism. Intervening when the purity of the marital sacrament was in jeopardy, the charivari crowd acted so as to restore harmony and equilibrium, in the relationship between individuals and the community as well as in that linking God and humanity.

Thus, even though many authorities – and in particular the clergy – objected to the tumultuous street demonstrations, these must be recognized as indicative of a hegemonic relationship. People staging a charivari were giving proof of their active attachment to ideological principles justifying a social order in which they, for the most part, occupied subordinate positions. At the same time they were, of course, insisting on their own right to regulate certain specific aspects of the life of the community. This was scarcely a revolutionary position totally at odds with ruling-class precepts; neither bishops nor governors valued passive obedience. The ideal of the 'loyal subject' or of the 'faithful Catholic' implied a positive commitment and allowed for a good deal of direct popular initiative. Nevertheless, in spite of consensus at the level of general principles, there was

²³ Though the magistrates of Montreal did issue a local ordinance prohibiting charivaris in the 1820s, there was never any provincial legislation, like that in place in France from the time of the Revolution, that was clearly directed against the custom. On the eve of the Rebellion, the legislative council of Lower Canada did consider a bill 'to repress the abuses consequent upon the assembling together of large numbers of persons under pretext of Charivaris': *Journals of the Legislative Council of the Province of Lower Canada*, vol. 25, 194 (26 Jan. 1836). On

parallel campaigns to combat 'vagrancy', rationalize poor relief and regulate taverns, see Jean-Marie Fecteau's important thesis, 'La pauvreté, le crime, l'état: Essai sur l'économie politique du contrôle social au Québec, 1791–1840' (thèse de doctorat de 3e cycle, Université de Paris VII, 1983).

²⁴ Palmer, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Davis, *op. cit.*, Burke, *op. cit.*, 199–204; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, trans. Mary Feeney (New York, 1979), esp. 301–2, 316.

conflict when magistrates and priests tried to suppress this particular form of public demonstration.

Charivari presumed a sort of 'people power' of the street as one of the constituents of the larger political-ecclesiastical order. It was, then, 'democratic' in a literal sense. This was a combative democracy, one which had to be defended against the repressive measures of officialdom. It was nevertheless a subordinate democracy, an exercise of popular power which assumed the existence of non-popular authority in a well-regulated community. But what if the community was not well regulated and the government no longer legitimate? This was the situation during the revolutionary crisis of 1837 when the colonial regime lost the capacity to rule with the consent of the governed. At that juncture, when attempts were made to base authority on popular sovereignty, the charivari form came to serve as a very useful vehicle for pressing the claims of the embryonic new order. This instrument of popular governance within the state (and church) became a weapon of revolt against the state.

The Lower Canadian crisis of 1837, which culminated in armed insurrection in November and December of that year, grew out of the campaign for colonial autonomy and democratic reform led by the middle-class radicals of the 'Patriot party'.²⁶ Thanks mainly to the consistent electoral support of the bulk of the French-Canadian population, these liberal politicians managed to control the provincial legislative assembly. Opposed to the Patriots was a coalition of merchants, government officials and settlers from the British Isles who tended to dominate all the other branches of the colonial state, including the executive, the judiciary and the non-elective legislative chamber. Acute political conflict had brought the machinery of representative government to a grinding halt by 1836. Finally, the imperial government intervened in the following spring, hoping to end the impasse by issuing a clear refusal to Patriot demands for constitutional reform and depriving the assembly of its financial powers. The result was a storm of protest that lasted through the summer of 1837, with great public rallies, calls for a boycott of British imports and vague talk by Patriot leaders about a re-enactment of the American Revolution at some point in the future. The constant theme of radical rhetoric was that the British measures against the assembly had made colonial rule in Lower Canada illegal and illegitimate. Apart from stirring up popular indignation, however, the Patriots made no serious efforts to prepare for a war which they still believed to be many years away. Events moved towards a showdown more quickly than predicted, though, as the mobilization of the populace, particularly the inhabitants of the Montreal District, provoked repressive counter-measures which in turn led to further resistance.

As the conflict intensified in June and July, noisy demonstrations, often carried out at

²⁶ Among the more important works on the Rebellion and the political developments leading to it, see Gérard Filteau, *Histoire des patriotes: L'explosion du nationalisme*, 3 vols (Montreal, 1938-42); S. D. Clark, *Movements of Political Protest in Canada, 1640-1840* (Toronto, 1959), 259-330; Fernand Ouellet, *Lower Canada 1791-1840: Social Change and*

Nationalism (Toronto, 1980); Jean-Paul Bernard, *Les Rébellions de 1837-1838: Les patriotes du Bas-Canada dans la mémoire collective et chez les historiens* (Montreal, 1983); Elinor Kyte Senior, *Redcoats and Patriotes: The Rebellions in Lower Canada 1837-38* (Ottawa, 1985).

night by disguised bands, became common. In August newspapers began to report ritual attacks against government partisans that they did not hesitate to call 'charivaris' (victims and attackers also used this term) and that did indeed seem to be closely modelled on the popular custom. This was the first appearance of political charivaris in Lower Canada and it came in two quite distinct phases. The first phase, from August to mid-October, seems to have been rather more spontaneous and popular in origin whereas, during the second phase (late October–early November 1837), the co-ordinating role of the Patriot bourgeois leadership became more apparent and charivaris were used for more clearly strategic purposes.

In the late summer and early fall of 1837 there were reports from several villages that a masked party gathered by night outside the home of a prominent Tory and 'gave him a serenade whose chords were scarcely soothing to the ears'.²⁷ These demonstrations resemble the politicized charivaris that became common in France under the July monarchy; indeed, they may have been inspired by European models, although I have no evidence of a direct connection. Certainly the negative serenades fit into established Canadian charivari traditions that were, of course, a French import of an earlier century; the link with native custom appears particularly in the choice of specific targets during this first phase of political charivaris. Masked revellers did not attack such obvious objects as officials or soldiers.²⁸ Nor did they direct their serenades against members of the English-speaking minority, even though many of the latter manifested a paranoid counter-nationalism that made them violent defenders of the British Empire. Anti-Patriot anglophones might be ostracized by their neighbours or they might find the tails and manes of their horses cut off. (This last form of harassment could certainly be placed under the broad heading of the carnivalesque, for it was a kind of symbolic castration designed to make the animal's owner a laughing-stock when he rode it in public.)²⁹ However, attacks modelled much more closely on the charivari were reserved, in the early fall of 1837, for French-Canadian partisans of the government, and particularly for individuals who had until recently taken part in the Patriot movement but had 'deserted the cause of the nation' when revolution loomed on the horizon. Members of the group – whether defined linguistically or in terms of political allegiance – who had broken ranks during an emergency when petty differences had to be forgotten, these 'turncoats', were perfect targets for a treatment, the charivari, which had always served, not to attack 'outsiders', but to reprove and punish the familiar deviant. Essentially expressions of hostility, these early political charivaris did not demand anything in particular of their victims, but they did probably have the effect of curbing the activities of influential

²⁷ *La Minerve* (Montreal), 10 Aug. 1837 (my translation). See also *Le Populaire* (Montreal), 27 Sept. 1837; 2, 9 and 16 Oct. 1837; *Montreal Gazette*, 30 Sept. 1837.

²⁸ There was one exception to this pattern. A crowd that had turned out to greet the Patriot leader Louis-Joseph Papineau at St Hyacinthe, learning that the commander of British forces happened also to be staying in the town, gathered round the house where the latter was

staying for a noisy vigil punctuated by catcalls and anti-government slogans.

²⁹ Archives nationales du Québec, documents relatifs aux événements de 1837–1838 (hereafter ANQ, 1837), deposition of Robert Hall, 15 July 1837. This practice, previously unknown in French-Canada as far as I can tell, may have been picked up from British immigrants. On animal mutilation of this sort in England, see Ingram, *op. cit.*, 87.

French-Canadians who might have been inclined to speak out in favour of the government.³⁰

Political charivaris of a special sort came to play a much more important role at a later stage of the confrontation, that is, in the two months preceding the military denouement of late November 1837. The central development of this period – one which led inexorably to the armed clash – was the breakdown of local administration in the countryside of western Lower Canada. While it awaited the arrival of additional troops from neighbouring colonies in the summer of 1837, the government had tried to stem the tide of agitation by banning 'seditious assemblies', but it found that proclamations to this effect were simply ignored. Particularly in the heavily populated Montreal District, long a Patriot hotbed, giant rallies succeeded one another and often it was the justices of the peace and militia captains, upon whom the colonial authorities depended to enforce their writ, who were organizing them. The governor reacted to this flagrant defiance by dismissing 'disloyal' magistrates and officers. Denouncing this move as further proof of British tyranny, Patriots who held the Queen's commission but who had been overlooked in the purge made a great show of resigning. Beginning in October, meetings were held in many parishes to set up new local administrations and, in the ensuing elections, the 'martyred' officers were usually reinstated. A parallel local government, based on popular sovereignty and completely divorced from the colonial regime, was then taking shape. On 23–4 October a great public meeting held at the village of St Charles to establish a federation of six counties south of Montreal gave official Patriot approval to these unco-ordinated local initiatives and urged all good citizens to imitate them.

Local government in Canada had always been rather rudimentary and subordinate to the central authorities in Quebec City. (The child of absolutism, Canada was ruled by colonial regimes – first the French, later the British – whose preoccupations were largely military and who dispensed with direct taxation and therefore with the communal institutions that could be so troublesome to western European monarchies.) By the time of the Rebellion, justices of the peace and militia captains, whose responsibilities were more of a police than of a military nature, were the only important public authorities, apart from priests, in the rural parishes of Lower Canada. They were all appointed by the governor but they were definitely members of the communities they administered. Indeed, the inhabitants found various ways of 'domesticating' officials who appeared in theory to be the agents of an external power. Each captain, for example, was presented with a 'maypole', a tall tree trunk decorated with flags and banners and planted in the ground in front of his house, in an elaborate ceremony that implied popular ratification of the governor's choice. In the fall of 1837 many maypoles became 'liberty poles' and, to mark the transformation, a sign reading 'elected by the people' was attached to a captain's mast.³¹

³⁰ This insistence on a certain unanimity on fundamental issues, and the concomitant punitive approach to dissenters, is quite common in most societies under emergency conditions such as revolution or war. See, for example, Rhys Isaac, 'Dramatizing the ideology of revolution: popular mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776',

William and Mary Quarterly, third series, xxxiii (July 1976), 357–85.

³¹ Robert Christie, *A History of the Late Province of Lower Canada, Parliamentary and Political, from the Commencement to the Close of its Existence as a Separate Province*, 6 vols (Montreal, 1866), v, 32–3. On French maypole

But what about officers and magistrates who declined to resign? There were many loyalists who tried to maintain their positions, even in areas where the population was overwhelmingly hostile to the government. From the Patriot point of view, these hold-outs were the willing agents of despotism and rebels against the emergent local regimes. At a more practical level, they appeared as potentially dangerous spies and fifth-columnists at a time when war with Great Britain looked less and less remote. The issue of the Queen's commissions therefore served to personalize the struggle by identifying important enemies and bringing great constitutional conflicts down to the local level. Accordingly, loyalist officers and magistrates in massively Patriot communities came under great pressure to resign. Some suffered the fate of Captain Louis Bessette, a prosperous inhabitant whose evening meal was disturbed by the sound of axes biting into wood. Going out to investigate, he found a band of men with blackened faces in the process of chopping down his maypole. The mast crashed to the ground and a great cheer went up from the party; the house was then besieged by the noisy, stone-throwing crowd until Bessette agreed to turn over his commission.³² The cutting down of captains' maypoles was a favourite gesture in 1837 and one rich in symbolic meaning. If the mast had originally been planted as a phallic token of respect for a patriarchal figure, Bessette's experience was, then, one of symbolic castration. At another level, however, this action should be seen as revoking the popular ratification of the captain's appointment that the maypole embodied. 'You are no longer our captain,' was the clear message addressed to Louis Bessette.

Whether accompanied by the severing of maypoles or not (and, of course, many of the magistrates and officers who held commissions were not militia captains), the charivari form was the preferred mechanism in the countryside south of Montreal for forcing refractory office-holders to resign. National origin and previous political commitments were now (October–November) no longer a consideration. Anyone who continued to hold office was subject to attack. Dudley Flowers of St Valentin was the victim of one typical charivari, which he described two weeks later in a judicial deposition:

I am a Lieutenant in the Militia. On the twenty seventh day of October last in the afternoon the following persons viz. C.H.O. Côté, Olivier Hébert, L.M. Decoigne, Julien Gagnon, Amable Lamoureux and Jacob Bouchard, came to my house and demanded my commission as such Lieutenant to which I made answer that I would give it up to none but the governor of the Province. Doctor Côté said that if I did not give up my commission I would be sorry for it – to which Gagnon added, 'Si vous ne voulez pas vivre en haine avec nous autres rendez votre commission.' Upon this they went away. About eleven o'clock in the night of the same day the same persons returned – at least I have every reason to believe that they were the same persons. . . . They began yelling in the most frightful manner. They threw stones at my house and broke the greatest part of my windows. A large stone passed very near one of my

customs and the transformation of the maypole into the liberty pole at the time of the Revolution, see Van Gennep, *Manuel de Folklore*, vol. 1, part 4, 1516–75; Mona Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire 1789–1799* (Paris, 1976), 280–316; Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in*

Romans, 296–7; Jean Boutier, 'Jacqueries en pays croquant: les révoltes paysannes en Aquitaine (décembre 1789-mars 1790)', *AESC*, 34e année (July–Aug. 1979), 764–5.

³² ANQ, 1837, no. 257, deposition of Louis Bessette, 5 Nov. 1837.

children and would have killed him if it had struck him. Julien Gagnon who had seen my barn full of oats when he came in the day time told me that I should not have to thresh them unless I gave up my commission and also said that my grain, my house and outhouses would be burnt. I saw one of the mob go with a firebrand to my barn with the intention as I verily believe of setting fire to it. But it was in a damp state from the recent rain and the fire would not take.

On the night of the following day (28th October last) it might be about ten o'clock a masked mob, composed of about thirty or forty persons attacked my house in a similar manner . . .

On the following day (Sunday) about seven in the evening, some sixty or seventy individuals attacked my house a third time in the same manner and with the same threats as on the former occasions but if possible with much more violence, beating kettles and pans, blowing horns, calling me a rebel, saying it would be the last time they would come as they would finish me in half an hour. They had in a short time with stones and other missiles broken in part of the roof of my house and boasted that it would soon be demolished. Fearing that such must inevitably be the case, I opened the door and told them that if four or five of their party would come in and give their names I would give them up my commission. Four or five of them did come in, disguised in the most hideous manner but refused to give their names. Finding that my life was actually in danger if I refused to comply with their requests, I handed them my commission. There were about fifteen of the last mentioned mob masked . . .

The same persons have declared in my presence that they were determined to compel in the same manner all persons holding commissions from her Majesty to surrender them. One of these individuals told me boastingly that they had obtained no less than sixty-two commissions in one day. I firmly believe that if Doctor Côté and some of the ringleaders were taken up and punished it would have the effect of alarming the others and keeping them quiet.³³

Many of the features of the 'traditional' charivari were present in this episode: the nocturnal setting, the 'hideous' disguises, the raucous serenade of blaring horns, banging pots and shouted insults. Even the lieutenant's initial encounter with the Patriot delegation recalled the negotiating process by which charivari fines were normally set: the talks were businesslike, superficially friendly but with an undertone of menace, and they were held in daylight, in an atmosphere that contrasted sharply with that of the charivari

³³ ANQ, 1837, no. 146, deposition of Dudley Flowers, 3 Nov. 1837. For accounts of similar charivaris, see the following depositions: *ibid.*, no. 75 (Isaac Coote, 10 Feb. 1838); no. 109 (Louis-Marc Decoigne, 17 Feb. 1838); no. 122 (Pierre Gamelin, 9 Nov. 1837); no. 90 (David Vitty, Rickinson Outtret, Robert Boys and Thomas Henry, 5 Nov. 1837); no. 103 (Nelson Mott, 6 Dec. 1837); no. 128 (C. H. Lindsay, 8 Nov. 1837); no. 87 (Antoine Bruneau, 17 Dec. 1837); no. 314 (Jean-Baptiste Casavant, 12 Nov. 1837); no. 115 (François St-Denis, 7 Nov.

1837); no. 318 (Benjamin Goulet, 20 Nov. 1837); no. 516 (Orange Tyler, 16 Nov. 1837); no. 3557 (W. U. Chaffers, 9 Nov. 1837); no. 158 (Ambroise Bédard, 10 Nov. 1837); PAC, RG4, A1, 524: 11 (Loop Odell, 17 Nov. 1837). Additional information appears in *Le Populaire*, 5 Nov. 1837; *L'Ami du Peuple* (Montreal), 8 Nov. 1837; PAC, RG9, IA1, vol. 48, James McGillvary to David McCallum, 26 Nov. 1837; Archives du diocèse de St-Jean-de-Québec, H. L. Amiot to Mgr. Bourget, St Cyprien, 16 Nov. 1837.

itself. Flowers resisted for some time the summons to resign but, following the example of an ordinary charivari crowd faced with a stubborn old widower, his attackers simply intensified their efforts, bringing more supporters and threatening ever more ferocious punishment on each successive evening. There were differences too, of course, notably in the stone-throwing and the overt threats of serious violence.

That the Patriots should have had recourse to the charivari custom at this juncture is not surprising. A coercive practice in which the aggressors' identities were concealed had obvious attractions at a time when arrest was still a real danger. This anonymity probably also served an equally important psychological purpose for the participants, that of overcoming inhibitions against aggressive behaviour. Indeed, the entire ritualistic package of charivari surely had this function. After all, Dudley Flowers was apparently a long-time resident of the community and he knew his attackers personally; even though he was a political enemy, the lieutenant was also a neighbour and therefore someone with whom it was important to maintain peaceful, though not necessarily cordial, relations. To turn on him with overt hostility would be to go against ingrained habits; masks and a familiar ritual may have made easier the transformation of neighbourly Jekylls into frightening Hydes.

The charivari custom offered more than simply an antidote to fears and uncertainties, however. The turning over of a sum of money was the central event of a traditional charivari and much of the pageantry was designed to extort this gift from an unwilling giver. What a perfect vehicle for forcing loyalists to resign or, more precisely, to 'turn over their commissions' as the Patriot mobs usually put it. The political charivaris of this second stage of the drama of 1837 were rather blunt in declaring their intention to overcome opposition to their demands, and low-level violence, consisting mainly of stone-throwing, was common. Men like Dudley Flowers, who resisted the initial attack, were likely to have their windows broken. Captain Bessette suffered more damage than any of the other charivari victims; after chopping down his maypole, the attacking party forced its way into his house and, calling for his resignation with a deafening roar, the intruders pounded out a rhythm with sticks and clubs until his table, windows and stovepipe had been smashed to bits. Now this toll of broken glass and damaged roofs, though severe by the standards of ordinary pre-Rebellion charivaris, seems quite light considering the context of serious political crisis. Even more striking is the complete absence of personal injuries. When one places this record against the cracked heads and burned houses that resulted from, for example, the anti-Irish riots of contemporary New England and New Brunswick – not to mention the destruction wrought by crowd action in revolutionary episodes comparable to 1837 – the restraining influence of the charivari form becomes all the more apparent.³⁴

Of course Dudley Flowers was not impressed by the relative mildness of the treatment he received: he truly thought his life and his property were in real and immediate peril and, though he was no coward, he was frightened enough to abandon his home and flee with his

³⁴ Ray Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800–1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York, 1938); Scott W. See, 'The Orange order and social violence in mid-nineteenth century Saint John', *Acadian-*

sis, xiii (Autumn 1983), 68–92. See also Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York, 1984), 264–5.

family to the city shortly after the events reported in his deposition. This is because the charivari, 'political' or otherwise, was designed to be frightening, particularly in the eyes of those who resisted its edicts. Before 1837, coffins and skull-and-crossbones designs hinted at deadly intentions but, during the Rebellion, the threats were much more explicit. Crowds attacked stubborn magistrates and officers with talk of arson and murder. Who could be sure they were simply bluffing when, as was often the case, masked revellers were seen carrying guns as well as firebrands? Lieutenant Flowers felt he had had a lucky escape and that only the damp weather had saved his barnful of grain from the Patriot torches. He might have been less worried had he known how many other loyalists had been similarly threatened, without one single building ever being fired. The fact that he did believe himself to be in serious danger shows just how well the charivari served its theatrical purposes in the fall of 1837, when dozens of local officials capitulated to the Patriot mobs.

So far I have been discussing the way in which the charivari form was applied during the campaign of late October–early November for wholly novel political purposes. Yet, beyond the surface resemblances, there were also elements of continuity with the past in the basic functions of the ritual. For example, the extortion of royal commissions seems to have been more than simply a means of destroying the government presence in the countryside; it also had meaning in the context of the specific relationship between an individual and the community of which he was a member. In other words, this forced gift played a role analogous to that of the ordinary charivari fine in signifying the giver's submission to the authority of the collectivity. But now the community as a whole and the Patriot cause were identified. Accordingly, some charivari victims were forced to shout '*Vive la liberté!*' or to cheer for Papineau, the Patriot chief, as further proof of recognition of the incipient new regime. In accepting the victim's commission, the crowd gave its implicit assurance (sometimes it was clearly stated) that the charivari was at an end.³⁵

There was a sense, then, in which a non-resigning officer such as Dudley Flowers was treated as a sinner, a contaminating influence in a community otherwise true to new civic ideals. The charivari worked so as to force him into the position of a penitent who had to purchase his reintegration into the fold at the price of a militia commission. Thus the admonition addressed to Lieutenant Flowers by Julien Gagnon during the preliminary visit to his home: resign your position, 'if you do not wish to live in a state of hatred with us.' No one expected him to become a militant Patriot overnight, but he was being offered an opportunity to make peace with his offended neighbours. It is important to emphasize that, just as conventional charivaris were aimed not against general immorality but against a specific affront to the wedding ceremony, so Flowers was targeted for a specific offence rather than some general nonconformity. Though government supporters at the time, not to mention later historians, saw the Rebellion of 1837 as stemming from a xenophobic

³⁵ There may have been an exception to this rule in Dudley Flowers's case, for a man approached him a few days after he had surrendered his commission and told him he must sign a copy of the resolutions passed at the St Charles meeting, failing which he would receive another visitation that night. Understandably intimidated, the lieutenant hastily

packed up his family and left the parish, and so it is impossible to know whether an attack really was planned. It seems likely that his visitor was an isolated individual playing a cruel joke since all the other charivari accounts indicate that hostilities ceased once the commission changed hands.

French-Canadian hostility to English-speaking fellow-citizens, no one reproached Dudley on national or religious grounds. His 'crime' was not in professing Protestantism, in speaking English, or even in believing in the Queen's majesty, but simply in retaining a commission at a time when all good citizens had a duty to resign. The atonement required of this wayward soul was just as specific and limited as the 'sin' itself. He had merely to make a gesture – that of turning over his commission – that signified a renunciation of former 'treason' and an acceptance of the authority of the Patriot crowd. The emphasis was on the outward act indicating a transfer of allegiance without any further surrender of personal autonomy. This was made clear to another loyalist militia officer, who proclaimed to the fifty blackened faces shouting for his resignation 'that if they compelled him to give up his commissions they could not change his principles'; that is alright, came the sarcastic reply, we do not wish to alter your religion.³⁶

The boast reported by Dudley Flowers of sixty-two political charivaris in his region alone may have been exaggerated but the basic point that, within a few weeks, dozens of resignations had been secured by this means is undeniable. By the second week of November there was, to all intents and purposes, no official government presence in most of the populous rural parishes of the District of Montreal, and an elective magistracy and militia were beginning to operate in its place. In such a situation the government naturally had recourse to its now reinforced military forces to enforce its own claim to sovereignty. The British expeditions that ventured out from Montreal were surprised at the resistance offered by the inhabitants, hastily organized through the revolutionized militia companies. The initial armed encounter at St Denis (23 November) was, in fact, a Patriot victory but, since the insurgent military effort was localized, fragmented and defensive, the troops soon crushed their amateur opponents. What followed, in many localities, was a series of very unrationalistic punitive actions; loyalists then had the satisfaction of watching flames race through the homes of neighbours who had so recently issued empty threats of arson. Turmoil continued for over a year, in Upper Canada (Ontario) as well as Lower Canada, while Patriot refugees in the northern states tried to enlist American support. But, by the end of the decade, the republican movement had been effectively destroyed.

French-Canada in particular was permanently marked by this defeat. The middle-class professionals who had once been at the centre of the Patriot movement hastily jettisoned their alliance with the artisans and peasants in the rush to make their peace with established authority. Police forces, public school systems and elaborate bureaucracies reinforced the colonial state, while the Catholic clergy saw its power and influence grow by

³⁶ PAC, RG4, A1, vol. 524, no. 11, deposition of Loop Odell, 17 Nov. 1837. This point needs to be qualified in the light of one isolated but glaring counter-example. In the parish of St Valentin, a French-Canadian convert to Protestantism was visited one night in mid-October by a party that 'made ludicrous noises with horns, bells, pans and other things'; after asking him if he was a Patriot, the attackers 'required that he should renounce his religion and go back to the Roman Catholic religion' (ANQ, 1837, no. 135, deposition of Eloi Babin, 13 Nov.

1837). Though scarcely an issue in other parts of Lower Canada, religion was a source of controversy in this one locality where a group of Swiss missionaries was active. Local inhabitants tended to view the mission as an instrument of the government party, for it accepted money from the Montreal merchants and refused to take part in the Patriot campaigns of 1837. See René Hardy, 'La rébellion de 1837-1838 et l'essor du protestantisme canadien-français', *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, xxix (Sept. 1975), 180-1.

leaps and bounds. Changes of this sort helped to contain social conflict in the mid-nineteenth century, but they hardly eliminated it. Lower Canada was actually a much more violent place and a more deeply divided society after 1840 than it had been before the Rebellion. Strikes by canal and railroad navvies heralded the advent of capitalism, but more typical of the age were essentially retrograde upheavals such as the Gavazzi riots which pitted Montreal's Catholics and Protestants against one another in 1853.³⁷ Lacking 'enlightened' allies and politically 'progressive' outlets for their resentment, plebian rioters vented their anger on one another.

Not surprisingly, the French-Canadian charivari of these bitter mid-century decades was quite different from the ritual of the pre-Rebellion period. A recent study focusing on the Trois-Rivières region, 1850–80, indicates that charivari was no longer linked exclusively to marriage and the sanctity of the wedding rites.³⁸ Belatedly following the lead of other countries, Lower Canadians turned the charivari into an all-purpose weapon for chastising moral transgressions and punishing nonconformists. Sexual deviants, drunkards and converts to Protestantism now joined mismatched couples as common targets of noisy demonstrations. Moreover, the attacks were much more vicious than they had been during the insurrection or earlier. Barns were burned, and men were stripped, beaten and thrown in the river. And no longer did a victim have to resist for a crowd to be provoked into violence: the first notice one villager had of his charivari came in the form of a whip lashing across his face. There was less emphasis than in the past on monetary exaction for many mobs sought, not a token of surrender, but the expulsion from the community of an offensive neighbour. In the changed circumstances of the post-Rebellion era, then, the charivari form was deployed in radically new and decidedly more cruel ways.

It seems significant that the most violent and intolerant phase in the history of the French-Canadian charivari occurred at a time of comparative weakness for the 'labouring classes'. When the rough music was at its roughest, it was also at its most politically impotent. Along with other forms of plebian hellraising, charivari shocked the bourgeoisie, but did little to curb the growth of elite power after 1840. In fact, the Canadian state never again faced a challenge as serious as that mounted to the sound of blaring horns and banging pots at the time of the Rebellion.

For such an orthodox and mild-mannered custom, the traditional French-Canadian charivari had proved remarkably effective as a vehicle of revolt. Of course the Patriots were soundly beaten. This is hardly surprising, given the relative strength of the parties in conflict: a small colony with no external allies faced the premier imperial power on earth at a time when the latter was not distracted by serious difficulties at home or abroad. The wonder is that the inhabitants of Lower Canada were able to cripple colonial rule to the extent that they did in the fall of 1837. This is where the politicized charivari form made a crucial contribution. Serving at first, as in contemporary France, as a medium of complaint and protest, it was soon deployed as the central element in a campaign to destroy

³⁷ Elinor Kyte Senior, *British Regulars in Montreal: An Imperial Garrison, 1832–1854* (Montreal, 1981), 109–33; Michael S. Cross, '“The Laws are like Cobwebs”: popular resistance to authority in mid-nineteenth century British North America' in Peter Waite, Sandra

Oxner and Thomas Barnes (eds), *Law in a Colonial Society: The Nova Scotia Experience* (Toronto, 1984), 110–12.

³⁸ René Hardy, 'Le charivari dans la sociabilité rurale' (unpublished paper).

government power in the countryside and to assert a practical sort of popular sovereignty. This was a truly revolutionary role for a venerable ritual, even if the ensuing debacle did expose the military and diplomatic weaknesses of the Patriot movement.

The charivari was well suited for its insurrectional mission in a number of practical ways. The very fact, first of all, that it was a custom of collective action made it an important cultural resource when groups of people had to be assembled and organized. Since collective institutions and traditions were rather weak in French Canada, recourse to the charivari was all the more natural. Additionally, and more specifically, charivari was a more useful device under the circumstances because of the way it concealed the identity of aggressors. Above all, the traditional focus on extortion lent itself to Patriot strategies in the fall of 1837, as did the larger drama of forcing wayward individuals to make a gesture of renunciation and submission. Charivari had always been coercive, but only in a very discriminating way. Its techniques were therefore well adapted to the delicate task of exacting a particular type of obedience from certain recalcitrant individuals, all without bloodshed.

In addition to its strictly tactical role, the charivari form functioned as a framework within which the villagers of Lower Canada grappled with the moral and philosophical problems of revolt. Linked to widely held and long-standing beliefs concerning relations between the individual, the community and the cosmic order, the custom was deeply rooted in dominant political and religious ideologies. At the same time, it embodied an implicit assertion of popular rights to a share of public authority. Here was a democratic germ, and one whose claims to legitimacy were formidable. Thus, when the crisis of colonial rule came, a law-abiding peasantry that brought out its charivari masks and noise-makers in order to depose local officials could feel it was doing the right thing in the right way.

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